



Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council

A Governor Appointed Leadership Organization of People with Disabilities

2 North Second Street • Suite 100 • Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17101

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Kevin Hensil
Director of Communications
717-364-1732 (office)
717-645-7514 (mobile)
kphensil@pasilc.org

HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES RALLY IN HARRISBURG

Urge Support of Disability Rights

HARRISBURG, Pa., April 3, 2009 — In one of the largest events of its type, hundreds of people with disabilities rallied in Harrisburg today. The speakers included Sen. Pat Vance, Secretary of Aging Mike Hall and several leaders of the disability community. The large crowd urged the Governor and Legislature to support programs for people with disabilities in the state budget and continue to improve community life for people with disabilities.

“We’re rallying during the Independent Living Conference to deliver a clear message that all people, including people with disabilities, are entitled to freedom and dignity to make individual choices and decisions,” said John Tague, Chairperson of the Governor's Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities. “This is about the freedom to fail, make mistakes and learn from those experiences, the same as persons without disabilities do.”

The threat of severe weather forced the cancelation of a planned march from the Hilton Hotel on Second St., to the state Capitol where the rally was scheduled to be held. Instead, nearly 300 people with disabilities from across the state are attending the eighth Power Through Knowledge Independent Living Conference. The event is the largest cross-disability conference held in Pennsylvania and is produced by the Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (PA SILC). Holding signs with several slogans, including “Support Independent Living” and “Our Homes, Not Nursing Homes” the crowd gathered in the Hilton Ballroom.

“This economic downturn has made it more critical than ever for people with disabilities to advocate for the removal of barriers and equality of civil rights,” said Zainab Jama, Executive Director of the PA SILC. “Our political leaders must support policies that enable people with disabilities to live a free and independent life by increasing accessible housing and transportation, equal employment opportunities and continuing to transition people out of nursing homes back into their community with the supports and services they need.

“That spirit has brought people with disabilities to Harrisburg from the conference and we’re bringing that message to our state leaders.”

The excited crowd applauded the Rendell Administration and Legislature for taking steps to reduce the state’s overreliance on nursing homes to provide long term care. In recent years the state has transitioned nearly 4,000 people out of nursing home into the community where they received in-home services and supports, known as Home and Community Based Services (HCBS), needed to live independently. The Governor has proposed additional investments in HCBS programs that would enable more than 3,200 additional people to stay in their own homes or move out of nursing homes.

Stan Holbrook, CEO of the Three Rivers Center for Independent Living in Pittsburgh, told the crowd that Pennsylvania must invest more in providing high quality, safe and effective in-home services rather than relying on nursing homes.

“Studies show that most people in nursing homes would rather live in the community and receive care, said Holbrook. “It’s morally the right decision and it makes economic sense, because at least two people can be serviced in the community for the cost of one person in a nursing home. Most importantly, it empowers people to continue raising their children, attend worship services, go to work and remain active in the community.

With the strong support of the disability community, the state’s goal is to give people choices in how to receive long term care by spending half on nursing homes and the other half to provide services and supports in a person’s own home. However, Pennsylvania’s still spends less than 30 percent of those dollars in the community, which ranks in the bottom 15 states in the country.

For people with disabilities living in the community, the need for more accessible housing and employment opportunities remain a longstanding priority.

"As many people with disabilities as possible should have as much say as possible over the direction their lives will take" said Steve Pennington, Director of the Center for Disability Law & Policy. "This is not a wish or a desire, but the cornerstone upon which this country is built. How we achieve control over our own lives is best expressed in terms of empowerment. This is not the state telling us what to do. It is government helping us to maximize our potential. This has tremendous consequences for people with disabilities."

Pennington believes the conference will send this message to government: "our freedom can only be achieved when government recognizes our individual autonomy and equality and conducts itself with fairness and impartiality."

Following the rally, the crowd returned to the Hilton for the remainder of the Power Through Knowledge Independent Living Conference which concludes Saturday evening.

ABOUT PA SILC

The Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council (PA SILC) is a cross-disability, consumer-controlled autonomous organization with 22 voting members appointed by the governor. PA SILC formed in 1987 to comply with the "Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986" as an advisory committee to the Independent Living Services Program within the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. Congress dramatically expanded the role of SILCs with the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 to include co-signing authority on the federally mandated State Plan for Independent Living.